

Policy Brief 21 FEB 2024

## Social Media Debates on Zambia's Evolving Relations with the West and East

Trends and Implications

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Social media debates on Zambia's foreign policy are strongly polarized and focussed on two inter-related thematic issues. The first strand of debate is centred on claims that the Zambian government is a puppet of the West and the cooperation that it receives from Western governments and private sector actors is the manifestation of imperialism. The second revolves around concerns that the government is undermining Zambia's long-held policy of non-alignment in international relations through its approach to the war in Ukraine, military cooperation with the United States (US), and negotiations for debt treatment involving China. Some opposition political parties advocate for a pro-Russia or pro-China foreign policy agenda and contend that the Zambian government's ties to the West are a regional security threat. However, the government insists that it supports multipolarity in global governance and mutually beneficial relations with the West and East. European policymakers need to recognize how these debates demonstrate the complexity of African agency and the domestic concerns that shape how African governments negotiate multipolarity.

Zambian opposition political parties have historically drawn on popular theories about neocolonialism to promote the notion that the ruling party is colluding with foreign entities to maintain control over the country and exploit its resources.<sup>1</sup> These discourses have proven to be effective political tools for discrediting the government and its cooperating partners, eliciting anger or anxiety from Zambian voters, and mobilizing a support base. The Patriotic Front (PF) was able to achieve these outcomes while it was an opposition party between 2005 and 2011, by using campaign rallies, newspaper articles and radio interviews to warn Zambian voters that the increase in flows of Chinese development assistance and investments that they were witnessing was a form neocolonialism. After the PF formed the government in 2011, opposition political parties, such as the United Party for National Development (UPND), used social media platforms to circulate similar narratives and rumours that suggested Chinese lenders had acquired strategic assets in the energy and telecommunications sectors that were pledged as collateral by the PF government under

<sup>1</sup> For an example of these theories, see Kwame Nkrumah, *Neo-colonialism: The Last Stage of Imperialism*. (London: Nelson, 1965).

the leadership of President Edgar Lungu (2015–2021).<sup>2</sup> Lungu's administration was also plagued by allegations of widespread corruption and political repression, which strained its relationship with Western governments and hampered its ability to restructure Zambia's debt after it defaulted at the height of the COVID-19 crisis. These challenges contributed to a rise in public discontent and the PF's resounding defeat in the August 2021 presidential, parliamentary, and local government elections.

The United States (US) and European countries have become the focus of political discourses about neocolonialism in Zambia since the UPND and President Hakainde Hichilema ascended to power in 2021. Opposition political parties, such as the Socialist Party (SP), Patriots for Economic Progress (PeP), Economic and Equity Party (EEP) and the PF faction led by Edgar Lungu, have been at the forefront of advancing social media debates about Zambia's foreign policy that present Western governments, think tanks, multilateral organisations, and multinational corporations (MNCs) as "imperialists" and threats to southern Africa's sovereignty. These politicians are sending repeated calls to action for their social media followers to demonstrate their patriotism and "save" the region from Western imperialism by not re-electing or voting for politicians, such as President Hichilema, who have strong ties to the West. In light of rising tensions in international relations, these opposition parties are also advocating for the strengthening of bilateral ties with China and Russia as an additional measure to shield the region from Western hegemony.

The Hichilema-led government has employed a cautious communication strategy that has mostly involved issuing press statements to counter these narratives, so that it can protect its ongoing efforts to market Zambia to external creditors and potential foreign investors as a stable country where free speech, democracy and the rule of law are respected. Despite these efforts, a recent Afrobarometer survey found that only 28.2 per cent of Zambians consider the European Union's (EU) economic and political influence on the country as very positive or somewhat positive.<sup>3</sup> This suggests that social media narratives about President Hichilema's relationship with the West are possibly gaining ground and have the potential to influence voting behaviour in future elections. This policy brief provides insights into these trends through an examination of debates about Zambia's foreign policy promoted between August 2021 and September 2023 on the Facebook and X (formerly Twitter) accounts of 10 political actors with national influence and views that are often reproduced in the print or digital news media (see the following info box for an overview).

<sup>2</sup> Emmanuel Matambo, "A choreographed Sinophobia? An analysis of China's identity from the perspective of Zambia's Patriotic Front," *Africa Review* 12, no. 1 (2020), 92-112; Ulande Nkomesha, "There is tension in Zambia because govt favours Chinese- Hichilema." *News Diggers*, 6 December 2020.

<sup>3</sup> "Afrobarometer Analyse online R9 2021/2023: Zambia" Afrobarometer, accessed 11 November 2023.

**Social media accounts used for the analysis:**

- Hakainde Hichilema, president of the Republic of Zambia.
- Nevers Mumba, president of the Movement for Multiparty Democracy (MMD) and a former vice president of the Republic of Zambia.
- Fred M'membe, president of the Socialist Party (SP) and a former award-winning journalist.
- Patriotic Front (PF), Zambia's ruling party between 2011 and 2021.
- Emmanuel Mwamba, PF Information & Publicity chairperson and a former diplomat.
- Bowman Lusambo, a former PF member of parliament and provincial minister.
- Chishala Kateka, president of the New Heritage Party (NHP).
- Chilufya Tayali, president of the Economic and Equity Party (EEP).
- Sean Tembo, president of the Patriots for Economic Progress (PeP).
- US Embassy Zambia.

## A puppet of Western interests

President Hakainde Hichilema's reputation as an advocate of democracy and good governance has contributed to the strengthening of Zambia's ties to the West. This has been marked by an upsurge in pledges of foreign direct investment (FDI), financial assistance, and political cooperation from the US, United Kingdom (UK), Germany and other EU member states. The Zambian government has also received its highest number of bilateral visits in 30 years from senior-ranking officials from these Western governments and multilateral institutions, such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank.<sup>4</sup> At the same time, the Zambian government has heightened its technical exchanges and strategic economic partnerships with diverse government and private sector actors from across Africa, Asia and the Middle East. President Hichilema has often used social media to assert that these partnerships are driven by an economic diplomacy strategy that is aimed at attracting FDI, securing a favourable debt treatment plan with the country's external creditors, reviving private sector-led economic growth and positioning Zambia in "the champions league" of international politics.<sup>5</sup> Senior members of the PF, SP, PeP and the EEP have recognized that the West's confidence in Hichilema's leadership boosts the likelihood that his government will achieve these goals and secure a second term in the 2026 general elections. Consequently, the above-mentioned opposition political parties have attempted to diminish the prospect that such an event will occur by promoting social media narratives that present President Hichilema as a self-serving businessman who is not pursuing Zambia's best interests, but is instead advancing the objectives of Western governments, multilateral organisations and MNCs because he is a "sell-out", "puppet" and "agent" of imperialism.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>4</sup> This includes the German Federal President Frank-Walter Steinmeier, Italian President Sergio Mattarella, US Vice President Kamala Harris, Czech Minister of Foreign Affairs Jan Lipavský, UK Foreign Secretary James Cleverly and the IMF Managing Director Kristalina Georgieva.

<sup>5</sup> Hakainde Hichilema, Facebook post, 18 February 2022, 8:57a.m., accessed 30 November 2023; Hakainde Hichilema, Facebook post, 12 July 2022, 3:38p.m., accessed 31 July 2023; Hakainde Hichilema, Facebook post, 27 January 2023, 4:31p.m., accessed 31 July 2023.

<sup>6</sup> Chilufya Tayali, Facebook post, 19 May 2022, 7:49a.m., accessed 31 July 2023; Fred M'membe, Facebook post, 29 October 2022, 8:40p.m., accessed 31 July 2023; Sean Tembo, Facebook post, 25 July 2023, 6:52a.m., accessed 31 July 2023; Fred M'membe, Facebook post, 31 July 2023, 8:07a.m., accessed 31 July 2023.

These narratives were initially focussed on the swift rate at which President Hichilema and the Minister of Finance & National Planning, Situmbeko Musokotwane, were able to secure meetings and financial bailout packages from the IMF and World Bank at the beginning of their tenure. Some politicians described the meetings and photocalls that demonstrated that Hichilema and Musokotwane enjoy warm relations with senior officials from these US-based institutions, as “scary” and a sign of how Zambia was losing its sovereignty to “the capitalists” and “the imperialists”.<sup>7</sup> These social media narratives have rarely explored the internal sources of the current debt crisis nor offered viable financial alternatives that can immediately supplement Zambia’s nearly empty treasury. Instead, these narratives have concentrated on stirring up memories of how the IMF and World Bank’s structural adjustment programme (SAP) constrained domestic planning in the 1990s, exacerbated the country’s socio-economic problems through austerity and contributed to a sharp rise in employment due to the privatisation of government-owned industries. This has negated the government’s efforts to dispel the widespread perception that IMF and World Bank’s staff are evil and to calm public anxiety about the conditions attached to their ongoing assistance by rebranding them as Zambian-owned entities that are supporting its domestic plans for economic reconstruction.<sup>8</sup>

President Hichilema’s frequent engagement with think tanks and media houses based in the US and Europe has also drawn persistent scrutiny from opposition political parties and led to allegations that he prefers to embrace foreign personnel and concepts rather than local ones. This includes his introduction of a Presidential Delivery Unit (PDU) at the Cabinet Office, which is said to be inspired by the Tony Blair Institute for Global Change.<sup>9</sup> It is also alleged that President Hichilema belongs to a network of African politicians and former heads of state that are working with the Brenthurst Foundation to expand the mineral rights and financial interests of large Western MNCs across the continent.<sup>10</sup> As a result, Hichilema is occasionally described on social media as an unpatriotic leader who lacks the courage to use his official engagements to point out instances of exploitation in economic relations between Africa and the West and to reprimand European or American officials who try to comment on Zambia’s external relations, particularly with China.<sup>11</sup>

The president’s fiercest critics have also used their social media platforms to disprove the government’s good governance credentials in the period after it was announced that Zambia would co-host the Summit for Democracy in March 2023, alongside the US, the Netherlands, Costa Rica and South Korea. In an attempt to prove that the Hichilema-led government is undemocratic, some politicians have resorted to publishing classified information about Zambia’s security services on social media or forged documents purporting to outline government plans to contain their influence and that of civic groups, such as the Catholic Church. After facing police detention and interrogation for malicious communications, politicians such as Fred M’membe and Emmanuel Mwamba have gone on to label President Hichilema as an emerging dictator and argue that he is exploiting the law and police to

<sup>7</sup> Saboi Imboela, Facebook post, 23 September 2021, 8:42p.m., accessed 31 July, 2023; The Mast, Facebook post, 10 September 2022, 12:20p.m., accessed 31 July 2023.

<sup>8</sup> Hakainde Hichilema (@HHichilema), X post, 18 July 2022, 5:23p.m., accessed 31 July 2023; Hakainde Hichilema. “Remarks made during a courtesy call by World Bank Country Director Nathan Belete”, Facebook video, posted by “Mwebantu” 27 July 2023, 9:12a.m., accessed 31 July 2023.

<sup>9</sup> Emmanuel Mwamba, Facebook post, 20 March 2023, 4:04p.m., accessed 31 July 2023.

<sup>10</sup> Emmanuel Mwamba, Facebook post, 15 July 2022, 8:23a.m., accessed 31 July 2023; The Mast, Facebook post, 18 July 2022, 3:18a.m., accessed 31 July 2023.

<sup>11</sup> Chilufya Tayali, Facebook video, 2:17. Posted by “EEP President Chilufya Tayali” 17 November 2022, 4:17p.m., accessed 1 August 2023; Emmanuel Mwamba, Facebook video, 3:02. Posted by “Emmanuel Mwamba” 23 February 2023, 12:20p.m., accessed 1 August 2023; Fred M’membe, Facebook post, 29 June 2023, 5:28p.m., accessed 1 August 1 2023.

persecute his political opponents.<sup>12</sup> Diplomats and senior government officials from the US and Europe, who have contested these claims or expressed positive comments about Hichilema's leadership, have been branded as his "puppet masters", "handlers" or "praise singers" and accused of attempting to deceive the Zambian public.<sup>13</sup> What is striking is that President Hichilema often receives accolades from African regional organisations and key partners from Japan, China, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates. However, their endorsement of his leadership has attracted little or no criticism at all from Zambia's leading opposition political parties. This underscores that Hichilema's critics are less interested in scrutinising the risks of his enhanced relations with non-Western leaders and instead are mostly concerned with condemning his ties to the West.

## Non-alignment does not mean neutrality in the New Cold War

Zambia's first government (1964–1991) was an active member of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) and advocated for the peaceful resolution of all conflicts through dialogue and negotiation during the Cold War. This contributed to its hosting of the 3rd Summit of the NAM in 1970 as well as President Kenneth Kaunda's emergence as a mediating figure in regional and international conflicts. Zambia's non-aligned status has not been a national priority or topic of discussion since the Cold War ended and Kaunda left office in 1991. It is only recently that some opposition political parties have capitalized on the re-emergence of a West-East geopolitical rivalry to reinforce their claim that President Hichilema is leading puppet regime whose foreign policy decisions are being directed by the West, and thus destroying the legacy left by Kaunda. The Hichilema-led government has issued numerous press statements to counter these allegations and emphasize that its foreign policy is underpinned by economic diplomacy and efforts to support global peace, security and stability based on the belief that "instability anywhere, is instability everywhere."<sup>14</sup> Three events, described below, have triggered this line of arguments about Zambia's non-aligned status. The first event took place on March 2nd, 2022, when the Zambian government voted in favour of the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) resolution ES-11/1, which condemned Russia's aggression against Ukraine through military force. The vote generated a mixed reaction in Zambia, including concerns that the government was threatening Zambia's friendship with Russia and the continuity of its bilateral cooperation dating back to the 1960s encompassing the defence, education, and agricultural sectors. The strongest objections to Zambia's UNGA vote were expressed by the leaders of the PF, SP and New Heritage Party (NHP) who asserted that the government should have abstained in order to remain non-aligned or neutral in what they consider to be the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation's (NATO's) proxy war against Russia that is aimed at restoring a unipolar world order led by the US.<sup>15</sup> Then Minister of Foreign Affairs & International Cooperation, Stanley Kakubo,

<sup>12</sup> Esther Chisola, "Police only arrested Mwamba because they assaulted him- Makebi", News Diggers, 19 June 2023, p. 7; Ulande Nkomesha, "M'membe, Police Face Off: The military command is not a classified group, you are abusing the law", News Diggers, 9 August 2023, p. 1.

<sup>13</sup> Bowman Lusambo, Facebook post, 1 April, 2023, 10:56a.m., accessed 1 August 2023; Chishala Kateka, Facebook post, 12 July 1 2023, 9:42a.m., accessed 1 August 2023.

<sup>14</sup> Hakainde Hichilema, "Remarks made during a joint press conference with German Federal President Frank-Walter Steinmeier." Facebook video, 33:33, posted by Hakainde Hichilema, 1 November 2023, accessed 30 November 2023.

<sup>15</sup> Bowman Lusambo, Facebook post, 2 March 2022, 11:50a.m., accessed 2 August 2023; Patriotic Front- PF, Facebook post, 5 March 2022, 7:11a.m., accessed 2 August 2023; The Mast, Facebook post, 14 March 2022, 5:45a.m., accessed 2 August 2023.

defended the UNGA vote by emphasizing that non-alignment does not mean a country should be indecisive in the face of war and that the vote was not against Russia, but instead was against the unnecessary loss of human life, which aligns with the principles of the UN Charter and the approach Zambia followed during the Cold War.<sup>16</sup> However, critics maintained that the government's voting pattern in subsequent UN resolutions on the war in Ukraine has demonstrated that it is clearly aligned with the West. Opposition political parties, such as the PF, even explored opportunities to use the debates on non-alignment to strategically build political and economic ties with Moscow.<sup>17</sup>

The second event that intensified debates on Zambia's non-aligned status occurred in June 2022, when the US government announced that senior officials from its Africa Command (AFRICOM) had met President Hichilema and opened an Office of Security Cooperation at the US embassy in Lusaka, but rumours began circulating on social media that it was operating as a covert military base. President Hichilema and the Minister of Defence, Ambrose Lufuma, released statements to dispute these rumours, but there was still considerable public outrage in Zambia and neighbouring Zimbabwe amidst concerns that an AFRICOM base would be used to facilitate regime change and undermine regional security.<sup>18</sup> These rumours gained fresh steam during the US-Africa Leaders Summit in December 2022, when a ranking member of the US Senate Committee on Foreign Relations stated the following on X (formerly Twitter): "I was honoured to meet with @HHichilema - a strong leader & bright spot for democracy in Africa. HH is working hard to curb China's malign & predatory influence in Zambia, as well as increase cooperation with the US. I look forward to many years of continued partnership."<sup>19</sup>

This statement about President Hichilema and the AFRICOM announcement have become key pieces of propaganda that his political rivals share periodically on Facebook to support their assertions that President Hichilema is an agent of imperialism who is transforming Zambia's foreign policy and supporting the US military-industrial complex.<sup>20</sup> Zambian opposition political parties have also highlighted the rise in terrorism and political instability in the Sahel region as a warning of what might happen in the Southern Africa Development Community (SADC) if a pro-West Hichilema is left unchecked to allow the US, France, Germany or any other European government to expand their military presence on the continent.<sup>21</sup> A decade ago, South African politician Julius Malema led a campaign urging the people of Botswana not to re-elect then President Ian Khama or any other politician that supports the US government's proposal to establish an AFRICOM base in their country. Zambian politicians have shared information about Malema's campaign and SADC member states' previous objections to the US government's plans to move its AFRICOM headquarters from Germany to the continent, as additional evidence of why each citizen needs to condemn the Hichilema-led government's military cooperation with the US.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>16</sup> Stanley Kakubo, "Ministerial Statement: Position Taken by the Zambian Government at the 11th Emergency Special Session of the United Nations General Assembly- Plenary Meeting on the Situation in Ukraine", 9 March 2022 (Lusaka: National Assembly of Zambia), accessed 2 August 2023.

<sup>17</sup> Patriotic Front- PF, Facebook post, 5 March 2022, 7:50a.m., accessed 2 August 2023.

<sup>18</sup> For example, see public commentary on US Embassy Zambia, Facebook post, 26 April 2022, 4:02p.m., accessed 2 August 2023; Hakainde Hichilema (@HHichilema), X post, 4 May 2022, 12:56p.m., accessed 2 August 2023.

<sup>19</sup> Jim Risch (@SenateForeign), X post, 14 December 2022, 6:41p.m., accessed 2 August 2023.

<sup>20</sup> Emmanuel Mwamba, Facebook post, 27 March 2023, 12:34p.m., accessed 3 August 2023; Fred M'membe, Facebook post, 29 July 2023, 10:04a.m., accessed 3 August 2023.

<sup>21</sup> Andrews Atta-Asamoah, "Proceed with caution: Africa's growing foreign military presence", ISS Today, 27 August 2019.

<sup>22</sup> Stephen F. Burgess, "US Africa Command, Changing security dynamics, and Perceptions of US Africa policy," USAF Institute for National Security Studies Research Paper (2008); Ntibinyane Ntibinyane, "Botswana dismisses Malema's military-base claim," Mail & Guardian, 2 August 2011; Emmanuel Mwamba, Facebook post, 15 July 2023, 12:03a.m., accessed 3 August 2023; Fred M'membe, "Hichilema Has Undermined Our Sovereignty, Self-Determination", Facebook video, 1:00, posted by Socialist Party Zambia, 19 July 2023, 8:09p.m., accessed 3 August 2023.

The third event that heightened debates on the country's non-aligned status occurred in January 2023 when visiting US Secretary of the Treasury Janet Yellen alleged that China, which is Zambia's single largest external creditor, was responsible for delays in the Zambian government's efforts to secure a debt treatment agreement under the Group of 20 (G-20) Common Framework. These comments prompted the Chinese Embassy in Zambia to warn the US government not to sabotage debt treatment efforts of sovereign countries.<sup>23</sup> Tensions further escalated after the US Embassy attempted to enhance investor confidence in Zambia's good governance mechanisms by commending President Hichilema for staff changes in the police service. The Chinese Ambassador took advantage of the ensuing public backlash to boast that China would never make irresponsible remarks about Zambia's internal affairs nor make it pick a side in the so-called "New Cold War".<sup>24</sup>

Throughout these and other events, local observers lamented that Zambia was turning into a battlefield where the US and China geopolitical rivalry was playing out. On the one hand, some opposition politicians argued that China was deliberately using the debt burden to hold Zambia hostage to its whims and urged Zambia's government to foster ties with Taipei instead of Beijing.<sup>25</sup> On the other hand, some politicians re-affirmed the importance of the Zambia-China relationship and interpreted President Hichilema's failure to undertake a single trip to Beijing to directly lobby support for Zambia's debt treatment negotiations as a sign that he lacks agency to build relations with the East without the approval of his "puppet masters" from the West.<sup>26</sup> The Zambian government contested these claims and this line of debate eventually dissipated after it agreed on a debt treatment plan with its official creditor committee that was co-chaired by China and France in June 2023, President Hichilema met Chinese President Xi Jinping during the 15th BRICS Summit and Hichilema travelled to China for an official state visit in September 2023.

President Hichilema has maintained that his government prefers a multipolar world where the US, China and multilateral organisations can work together as "partners for prosperity" to ensure a peaceful and stable environment for economic growth.<sup>27</sup> His position on the war in Ukraine has also remained on the need for mediation and political dialogue to end the loss of life, human displacement, high fuel prices and global food insecurity that have resulted from the conflict. In line with this view, President Hichilema participated in the African Peace Mission to Kyiv and Moscow in June 2023 and the Ukrainian government has invited him to join its Global Peace Summit coordination group.<sup>28</sup> Members of his Cabinet have also reiterated that Zambia is a non-aligned country that will work with any country from the West or East, denied claims that they are "puppets" of the West and criticised opposition political parties for attempting to use social media to re-define Zambia's foreign policy agenda.<sup>29</sup>

In spite of these statements, some opposition political parties and academics have continued to strategically publish a mixture of real news and unverifiable information about

<sup>23</sup> Chinese Embassy in Zambia, Facebook post, 23 January 2023, 7:39p.m., accessed 3 August 2023.

<sup>24</sup> US Embassy Zambia, Facebook post, 16 April 2023, 11:23a.m.; Philip Chisalu, "China supports Zambia independently, never makes irresponsible remarks about govt decisions-Envoy", News Diggers, 24 April 2023.

<sup>25</sup> Miles Sampa, Facebook post, 25 May 2023, 8:47a.m., accessed 3 August 2023.

<sup>26</sup> Sean Tembo, Facebook post, 29 January 2023, 9:01a.m., accessed 3 August 2023; Bowman Lusambo, Facebook post, 19 April 2023, 8:18a.m., accessed 3 August 2023; Fred M'embe, Facebook post, 5 March 2023, 1:16p.m., accessed 3 August 2023; Patriotic Front- PF, Facebook post, 25 May 2023, 9:37p.m., accessed 3 August 2023.

<sup>27</sup> Hakainde Hichilema, "It's time to see things differently. Our partners for prosperity the US and China..." Facebook video, 5:15, posted by Hakainde Hichilema, 1 August 2023, 12:36p.m., accessed 3 August 2023; Hakainde Hichilema, (@HHichilema), X post, 6 April 2023, 1:29p.m., accessed 3 August 2023.

<sup>28</sup> The Presidential Office of Ukraine. "President of Ukraine and President of Zambia discussed the implementation of the Peace Formula and prolongation of the grain corridor", 11 August 2023, accessed 17 August 2023.

<sup>29</sup> Mwenya Mofya, "Negative narratives drawing us backwards- Haimbe", News Diggers, 30 March 2023; Mwenya Mofya, "It's irresponsible for opposition to articulate their own foreign policy- Milupi", News Diggers, 4 April 2023; Ministry of Information and Media- Zambia, Facebook post, 28 July 2023, 5:34p.m., accessed 3 August 2023.

international relations in a manner that leads their social media followers to fill in the blanks and produce misinformation themselves. This includes details on the anti-colonial solidarity that Russia and China provided to African countries during the 20th century, harmful Cold War interventions that Western governments undertook in countries such as the Democratic Republic of Congo, the benefits of bilateral cooperation with Russia, and the BRICS' (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa) efforts to advance an alternative to the US dollar-based international trade system.<sup>30</sup> However, most politicians do acknowledge that bilateral cooperation from Russia and China is motivated by the self-interests of each country, Zambia cannot avoid engaging with Western countries due to their economic and political influence on the global stage, and that there is a need to ensure that win-win outcomes are obtained in all partnerships with the West and the East.

## Voting against imperialist puppets

It is not clear if the PF, SP, PeP, EEP and NHP have agreed to take part in a joint social media influence operation against the Hichilema-led government or if the similarities in their social media posts have naturally unfolded over time. However, these opposition parties are repeatedly encouraging their social media followers to protect Zambia's sovereignty from Western imperialists by voting for them instead of the UPND in the 2026 presidential, parliamentary and local government elections or any by-election that arises before then. These political actors tend to direct their social media posts towards Zambia's youth since it is estimated that almost 80 per cent of the population is less than 35 years old and the youth vote played a key role in propelling President Hichilema to power in 2021.<sup>31</sup> Nevers Mumba, the president of the Movement for Multiparty Democracy (MMD), has often described the actions of his peers as being part of a malicious propaganda war aimed at accruing political capital and encouraged Zambian youth to critically analyse all the different narratives on the country's foreign policy that are being shared on social media.<sup>32</sup> What has emerged is a fragmented political landscape where Mumba's rivals have labelled him and anyone else who critiques their arguments as President Hichilema's naive "praise singers".

These debates have taken on a regional dimension. In the months leading up to August 2023, senior members of the PF and SP encouraged their Zimbabwean social media followers to vote for Emmerson Mnangagwa of the Zimbabwe African National Union-Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF) party that liberated them from British settler colonialism, instead of Nelson Chamisa who they alleged was a Western imperialist puppet supported by President Hichilema.<sup>33</sup> On the eve of Zimbabwe's harmonized elections, these Zambian opposition parties declared that a plot to facilitate regime change was brewing after President Hichilema used his role as chairperson of the SADC Organ on Politics, Defence & Security Affairs to appoint Nevers Mumba as head of the SADC Election Observer Mission (SEOM).<sup>34</sup>

<sup>30</sup> Lubinda Haabazoka, Facebook post, 27 March 2023, 8:20a.m., accessed 3 August 2023; Chishala Kateka, Facebook post, 8 May 2023, 9:40a.m., accessed 3 August 2023; Fred M'membe, "At the Russian-Africa Summit 2023", Facebook video, 10:44, posted by Socialist Party Zambia, 27 July 2023, 3:23p.m., accessed 3 August 2023.

<sup>31</sup> Zambia Statistics Agency and Ministry of Labour & Social Security. 2021 Labour Force Survey Report. Lusaka: ZAMSTATS, 2021.

<sup>32</sup> Nevers Mumba, Facebook post, 23 June 2022, 6:11p.m., accessed 17 August 2023; Nevers Mumba, Facebook post, 9 August 2023, 10:03p.m., accessed 17 August 2023.

<sup>33</sup> Bowman Lusambo (@BowmanLusambo), X post, 26 June 2023, 3:49p.m., accessed 19 August 2023; Fred M'membe (@DrFredMmembe), X post, 19 July 2023, 2:26p.m., accessed 19 August 2023.

<sup>34</sup> President Hichilema also appointed two former Republican Vice Presidents, Enoch Kavindele and Godfrey Miyaanda, to head the SEOM to Eswatini's September 2023 elections and Madagascar's November 2023 elections, respectively.

After polls closed, these political parties and members of ZANU-PF cited some similarities in the SEOM and EU Election Observer Mission reports as evidence that President Hichilema, Mumba, Chamisa and the EU were attempting to achieve regime change by discrediting Mnangagwa's electoral success. A senior member of the ZANU-PF also went on X to publish a veiled threat directed towards President Hichilema and Mumba, which made reference to how Zambian President Levy Mwanawasa died under suspicious circumstances shortly after he allegedly attempted to use SADC to assist the UK government to intervene in Zimbabwe's controversial 2008 presidential election that was won by Robert Mugabe.<sup>35</sup>

Regional tensions further escalated when Zimbabwe's state-owned broadcaster published a documentary featuring Zambian politicians from the PF, SP and EEP, which reiterated many of the narratives that are highlighted in this policy brief and additionally claimed that President Hichilema, Mumba, Chamisa, South African politician Mmusi Maimane and Ugandan politician Bobi Wine are part of an alliance that is using the guise of liberal democracy to entrench Western imperialism in east and southern Africa.<sup>36</sup> Fikile Mbalula, the Secretary General of South Africa's African National Congress (ANC), made similar claims in a since-deleted post on X as well as in a statement in which he declared that ZANU-PF's re-election signalled "the defeat of imperialist puppets" and warned African youths that the fight against Western imperialism is a continuous struggle.<sup>37</sup> President Hichilema chose to resolve these tensions with his South African and Zimbabwean counterparts through SADC and bilateral diplomatic channels. However, after investigating the statements made in the Zimbabwean documentary, the Zambia police service charged two politicians, Fred M'membe and Raphael Nakachinda, with communicating information that is useful to a foreign power and harmful to the security of Zambia.<sup>38</sup>

## Conclusions and recommendations

This policy brief has shown that numerous social media narratives are circulating about Zambia's foreign policy and the government's response to the rising geopolitical tensions between the West and East. At present, some opposition political parties are attempting to discredit the government, stoke public discontent and gain political capital by disseminating social media narratives that suggest President Hichilema is leading an imperialist puppet regime that is enabling Western governments and private sector actors to exploit Zambia's resources and define its foreign policy decisions. These narratives have been reproduced by politicians from Zimbabwe's ruling ZANU-PF out of fear that President Hichilema will work with the EU and US government to oust them from power. The Hichilema-led government is employing a cautious communication strategy to debunk these narratives so that it can avoid fuelling polarization and damaging Zambia's global image as a stable country. However, this strategy is failing to keep pace with the rapid rate in which opposition political parties are disseminating fresh narratives to explain its domestic and foreign policy actions.

European policymakers and diplomats must therefore consider the historical, domestic and regional context in which these social media debates are occurring before reacting and

<sup>35</sup> Patrick Chinamasa (@Chinamasa\_PA), X post, 3 September 2023, 8:55a.m., accessed 26 October 2023.

<sup>36</sup> ZBC News. "The Grand Regional Scheme: How Foreign Powers and Local Elites are Destroying Africa", YouTube video, 32:19, posted by "ZBC News" 15 September 2023; Nevers Mumba, Facebook post, 16 September 2023, 6:20p.m., accessed 26 October 2023.

<sup>37</sup> The Herald Zimbabwe @HeraldZimbabwe, X post, 5 September 2023, 11:45 a.m., accessed 26 October 2023.

<sup>38</sup> Lusaka Times. "Espionage Charges: Raphael Nakachinda and Dr Fred M'membe Under Police Scrutiny", Lusaka Times, 16 November 2023, accessed 17 November 2023.

exercise caution when making remarks about Zambia's domestic political landscape and foreign policy. The most serious concerns about Zambia's external relations, particularly with China and Russia, should be reserved for closed-door meetings with senior government officials and not communicated through the press or social media, unless it is absolutely necessary or a Zambian government official directly invites comments. It is important to recognize that opposition political parties that are promoting an anti-imperialist stance in their social media campaigns are also constructing Russia and China as counter hegemonic powers that respect African sovereignty and can protect Zambia's right to self-determination. To substantiate their arguments on social media, these political parties have shared statements that indicate that some NATO members may withhold bilateral assistance from African governments that maintain economic ties with Russia.<sup>39</sup>

In the current political climate, European policymakers must ensure that statements aimed at building the international community's confidence in the good governance mechanisms of an African partner country, such as Zambia, are clearly articulated to avoid creating the perception that they are interfering in its internal affairs. However, this does not imply that they should censor concerns about political repression, human rights abuses or corruption committed by the Zambian government. European governments, think tanks, multilateral organisations and MNCs can use public engagement activities, such as town hall meetings, to foster dialogue and mutual understanding about their cooperation with Zambian nationals. Greater transparency about the commercial or foreign policy interests that underlie European political, economic and development cooperation agreements with the Zambian government can also foster trust. Any information that is communicated through social media should include a link to a blog or short multimedia video that illustrates the evolution of a project from high-level discussions to the signing of partnership agreements and the production of tangible outcomes. This will help mitigate the misinterpretation of information about European cooperation and demystify conspiracy theories about its sinister ulterior motives.

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<sup>39</sup> Oliver Moody, "Back Russia's war in Ukraine and lose aid, Finland tells African states", The Times, 20 June 2023, accessed 17 November 2023.

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